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ABSTRACT

Teachers should begin to think about how they mete out responsibility for spoken and written discourse in the classroom. Research indicates that most teachers initiate and sustain a question-answer-evaluation pattern. This pattern is doubly enacted in the composition course in writing as well as speaking. Unfortunately, this pattern may also condition students not to ask questions, and to believe that the only circumstances under which they should write is when a teacher asks them a question. However, since questions and answers are an important part of academics and since students need to have skills in recognizing and answering questions to be successful, what is required is a practice that would allow students to think, speak, and write for themselves, but as students of academic culture (i.e., as "serious" students). By adopting the approach to content of a cultural anthropologist, students--especially foreign students--have an edge as observers, since very little they see strikes them as natural. Further, since foreign students are observing the very culture they need to learn about, class discussions and essays can draw on their culture shock and loneliness within an academic frame. And while the teacher, in class discussions, may still be the manager and the critical interlocutor, the students themselves begin to consistently frame essay questions suitable for everyone. (CRH)

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The Context of Cooperation in Academic Discourse

Speech act analysis bespeaks a desire to know what is at stake when people talk and write to one another. To say that speech is action commits us not only to seeing that when we talk or write we are doing something (like inviting, promising, informing, regaling, or threatening). Speech as action also commits us to recognizing that we are responsible for what we say and write. I mention responsibility at the outset because knowing what speakers and writers understand as their responsibility towards hearers and readers is critical to analyzing what people are doing when they talk and write.

When we look at speaking and writing in terms of responsibility, then as teachers we can begin to think about how we mete out responsibility for spoken and written discourse in our classrooms. Research on classroom discourse indicates that most teachers initiate and sustain a Question-Answer-Evaluation pattern. [Michael Stubbs, Language, Schools and Classrooms (London: Metheun, 1976).] Teachers ask the questions, students answer them, and teachers evaluate students' answers. Such a pattern of classroom discourse would of course be doubly enacted in a composition course--in writing as well as speaking--for we not only follow the Question-Answer-Evaluation--pattern during class discussion. We recapitulate the

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pattern by asking essay questions which students answer and we then evaluate.

Perhaps the pattern seems natural to us because it is familiar (after all we participated in it both as students and as teachers). And, no doubt there are plenty of times when this school version of the Socratic method is appropriate. What strikes classroom discourse analysts about it is, of course, the fact that teachers often ask questions to which they already know the answers. Frankly, while I recognize that the pattern has all the parity of a police interrogation, I don't myself expect classroom discourse to resemble a conversation among peers. However, as a writing teacher, I wonder if the predictability of the pattern--where teachers ask questions and students answer them--doesn't misconstrue what I mean by writing, in particluar what I see as the writer's responsibility to the reader. For instance, it looks to me as if the model says not only that teachers are responsible for asking questions, but that students are not. Yet my own experience as a writer tells me that writing is as much or more a matter of formulating questions as answering them.

My own concern about the Question-Answer-Evaluation paradigm is then pragmatic. I'm concerned that the kind of power displayed by the pattern--where teachers have exclusive rights over asking questions--confounds writing pedagogy. I'm concerned that my students might very well be learning from such a paradigm that they couldn't write without me, and that they wouldn't write unless I, or some other teacher, asked them to answer a question. If that's the case, then the practical

problem teachers face is how to relinquish exclusive rights to question asking without also abrogating their responsibility to teach. I'm assuming that the procedure in which I ask the questions is not simply a display of power, but an attempt to teach students what I think they need to know as writers.

I've decided that in my own case, and perhaps in others as well, questions represent a circumlocutious way to let students know what kinds of questions an academic, like me, might ask about the topic under discussion. Their answers, then, indicate the extent to which they are getting the hang of acting like responsive college students. Seen in this light, the situation enacted by the Question-Answer-Evaluation paradigm would be an academic version of H. Paul Grice's Cooperative Principle--"Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged." ["Logic and Conversation," p. 45; in Syntax and Semantics III. Ed. Peter Cole and Jerry L. Morgan. (New York: Academic Press, 1975).] Questions state the terms of the discussion, students' answers indicate the extent to which they agree to participate in the on-going conversation, and evaluation of their answers constitutes an interpretation of the success of their contributions relative to the stage and purpose or direction of the conversation. To see the Question-Answer-Evaluation paradigm as an academic conversation, more accurately a rehearsal of one in which everyone takes assigned parts, is at least a way to explain what teachers hope to accomplish by asking questions which students answer and we evaluate.

It seems obvious to me that the motive behind the paradigm is a good one, for the pattern suggests that students are ignorant of what academics do and need to learn how to think, speak, and write like academics if they are to benefit from their stay in what must seem a foreign country indeed. In Errors and Expectations (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), Mina Shaughnessy speaks of an ideal classroom:

> What is needed is a classroom model that grants teachers the responsibility for content and procedures but at the same time grants students the kind of social independence they need in order to think and speak and write for themselves. (p. 83)

Shaughnessy, of course, has only limned the goal in her statement. What is required is a practice which accomplishes the goal, that is, a way to create the conditions of social independence which would allow students to think and speak and write for themselves, but as students of academic culture.

What I have in mind is another way to broach the issue of what students need to know in order to write school prose. Simply put, they need to know how academics think, speak, and write about subject matter if they are to present themselves to their various professors as "serious" students--in class discussions and in the essays they write. The approach I used with my first year undergraduate foreign students is, by contrast with the Question-Answer-Evaluation paradigm, both more direct and more explicit. Students were asked to learn to approach all content from the perspective of a cultural anthropologist. They were asked to learn how

anthropologists "see" the world by applying techniques presented in a textbook, now unfortunately out of print, called Doing Anthropology (Hunter, David E. and Maryann B. Foley 1976). The book sets out to teach students how anthropologists observe, record, describe, and analyze a variety of social settings and scenes. I chose anthropology for several reasons: 1) foreign students almost need to be anthropologists when they first come to a country, since they are quite frankly scared, lonely, and often appalled by the folkways they encounter inside the school and outside, in the town or city; 2) their status as foreigners gives them an edge as observers, since very little strikes them as natural. As it turned out, anthropology was a good choice for this particular group because it provided them with a variety of reasons to write informally (taking notes on their observations and interviews). Moreover, since they were examining the very culture they needed to learn about, class discussions and essays could draw on their culture shock and loneliness within the academic frame of cultural anthropology. While there were many problems incurred throughout the semester, particularly with respect to the difficulties of learning to observe and record events, on the whole students got better at cultural anthropology and they wrote a variety of informal and formal writing assignments in which they consistently took the perspective of cultural anthropologists. I set the assignments, the tasks, that is, but they framed the questions. I asked them, for instance, to observe and record how their teachers indicated that classes were beginning. Each of them arrived early, took notes on their teachers' behavior prior to class, and wrote up descriptions of

what their teachers did to indicate that the actual work of the class was to begin. In the course of discussing their respective classes, they discovered that large lecture courses often have a period of informality (when the teacher chats to students nearby), but that small classes are often quite formal, by comparison, at the outset (with the teacher calling roll). These discussions led to essay questions in which they tried to postulate reasons for differences in their professors' teaching behaviors with regard to degrees of formality.

They set a number of writing assignments for themselves, including an analysis of family dinners (an excursion in nostalgia which occurred close to Thanksgiving) and a cooperative project in which they tried to discover dating patterns amongst undergraduates (by constructing a survey, followed by telephone interviews, buttressed by close observations in dormitory cafeterias, the library, and the student union). While their writing projects are instructive, at least insofar as they were often more ambitious than any I might have designed for them, I think that class transcripts are even more instructive because they give a better sense of how they enacted their responsibilities as novice cultural anthropologists.

Take a look at the transcript (Appendix), which was taken at the beginning of the fifth week of classes and concerns a discussion we were having about an essay question one of the students had suggested as appropriate for the entire class. The students had read Jean Briggs' essay, "Kapluna Daughter" (see Harmon and Hunter, above), in which she discusses some problems she was not able to resolve as an anthropologist

living amongst Eskimos as an adopted daughter. I have used pseudonyms for all the students, each of whom had formulated at least two essay questions suitable for everyone. The strip you have picks up on a discussion of Carmen's question:

Describe the things in the Eskimo family's behavior which led Jean to have doubts about the way she was looked upon by them.

Insofar as the discussion has been framed by Carmen's question, cooperation on the part of students clearly depends on their having read the essay and their willingness to offer events and discuss them in terms of Carmen's question.

While there are many ways we might go about analyzing this transcript, with respect to what the teacher does in the absence of questioning, several possibilities present themselves. Her most salient maneuver is reframing. For instance, she tells Demetrius that his comment about how the Eskimos reacted to Briggs' anger over the canoe is an inference. Naming his statement and then directing him to consider what else Briggs relates in support of the inference focuses Demetrius once again on incidents. She does something very like that again with Mario. That is, she reframes his comment about the change in conversational pattern, by first renaming the activity itself (initiation) and then suggesting how he could confirm his claim. Notice that while the actual terms in which she reframes their remarks are not predictable, the point of reference certainly is. Again and again, she is telling them how to go about supporting their arguments (that incident X or incident Y is telling). In Gricean terms, it might be said that she's trying to get them to demonstrate the relevance of the incidents in academic terms. At least,

we could argue that the point of reframing Mario's comment as a matter of initiation is to direct him to collect information about conversational initiatives throught the essay so that he can fit his claim to the evidence, that is, qualify it in light of Briggs' essay.

Although this transcript indicates that the class discussion resembles everyday conversation more than the Question-Answer-Evaluation pattern would (notice how Demetrius interrupts the teacher in order to make his statement about the tent), it differs from a conversation among peers in one very important way. All conversational contributions are offered to the teacher. In a later portion of the transcript from that day, there is one brief exchange between students. However, the teacher not only manages the talk, by calling on people. She is also the critical interlocutor. Frankly, I'm not sure what to make of this phenomenon. On the one hand, it makes sense, given the fact that students are accustomed to referencing their remarks to teachers and also given the fact that the teacher sees her job as reframing their comments in terms of academic discourse conventions. On the other hand, it looks as if she sometimes attenuates discussions of events themselves by prematurely reframing their remarks. In order to find out if students in this class ever assume her role, we'd need to look at many transcripts.

APPENDIX

Transcript for The Context of Cooperation in Academic Discourse*

Demetrius: =I think we should examine eh why they do speak an' the fact that they thought that eh that the white people have come to ask for the boat, an' they thought that eh she want to, you know, she got very angry an' they didn't like that. An ( )

Teacher: OK. That would be the inference that you were making or that she was certainly asking you to make. That's in the same category. But=

Demetrius: Yeah

Teacher: =first you'd want to look at just the stuff that happened that she was using to make her inference.

Demetrius: Yes. Yes. Inuttiaq's attitude? For the-to raise the tent?

Teacher: Ok. That that=

Demetrius: =An' that they didn't-he went and helped her to bring the tent from the nursing station but then he wouldn't help her to put it up.

Teacher: OK. I think that was certainly something that she told us about she wanted us to pay attention to an' something you might want to an' something you might want to pay attention to too. Is it Bill or Mario who had the hand up?

Mario: (Also) from the beginning everybody talks to her but after the canoe incident nobody started the conversation. She has to speak first an' then they will answer, but nobody went up to her and started to talk.

Teacher: OK. There's the question of who's initiating the conversation, right?

Mario: Uh hmm

Teacher: That's certainly one thing to go through and check. Really wouldn't be all that hard to check either, would it? Just go back through the essay looking for who's initiating conversation. Hans?

contiguous utterances: =
transcriptionist doubt: ( )
emphasis: _____
abrupt shift: -

* I wish to thank Cheri Francis who taped and transcribed all class sessions in the Fall of 1982 and was kind enough to give me copies of her transcripts.